Irene Cheng
Profesora asociada / Associate Professor
California College of the Arts, USA
Revisionist in the best possible way, this essay uncovers the racialist genealogies of modern architecture. Re-reading architectural history classics – including Quatremère de Quincy, Owen Jones, Viollet-le-Duc, Charles Garnier, Adolf Loos, or Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson – the author unravels a history of modern architecture intimately tied to the belief in the superiority of the Aryan or Germanic race. In their efforts to find a modern architecture – and in close contact with the rise of racial sciences of the nineteenth century – these authors laid the foundations of modernism on changing racial ideals, from the natural to the historical racialism and, ultimately, to its whitewashing through universalism.
Recent scholarship has revised traditional narratives of architectural modernism (emphasizing industrialization, capitalism, and avant-garde aesthetics) to instead stress the historical contexts of imperialism, colonialism, and migration (see, for example: Akan, 2012; Avermaete et al, 2010; Osayimwese, 2017). We can now recognize that modern architecture was shaped as much by ‘internal’ historical forces as by the kinds of transnational encounters enabled by empire and globalization – epitomized by epiphanies before ‘primitive huts’ at world expositions, experiments in construction techniques first undertaken in the colonies, and countless episodes of travel and emigration. Yet the specific role of racialism – the idea that humankind can be divided into indelible and unequally endowed biological groupings – in the entanglements of modernity, history, empire, and architecture has not been sufficiently recognized.1 What I want to develop here is the hypothesis that ideas about race were constitutive to the development of modern architectural theory. Specifically, concepts regarding different population groups’ distinct mental-cultural aptitudes and pasts helped construct concepts of historicity and architectural progress that were critical to the very idea of what it means to be “modern” and therefore to architectural modernism. If it has become a commonplace that twentieth-century architectural modernism was unthinkable without nineteenth-century historicism – without Europeans becoming aware of their own distinct and relative place within world history – then we must also recognize that this historical self-knowledge required the comparative study of other peoples and cultures, both civilizations from the distant past as well as the racial others that Europeans encountered through imperial expansion, cultures of collection, print publications, and world expositions.2 In the nineteenth century, many prominent architects searching for an architecture of the future believed that the answer lay in finding the laws or genetic principles governing historical cultural development. Racial theorists – who posited that history was synonymous with racial history – provided several leading architectural thinkers with a useful explanatory framework. Race science became one of several emerging ‘human sciences’ that architects drew on for epistemic legitimacy and to derive a rational, historically conscious theory of design.3

While this essay will focus primarily on the most egregious instances, it’s fair to say that most nineteenth-century European architects and theorists consciously or unconsciously shared several racial beliefs: First, that mankind could be divided into distinct biological groups marked by inherited physical and intellectual traits; second, that different races and cultures produced characteristic forms of building – identifiable as ‘styles’; third, that processes of racial evolution, diffusion, and hybridization could help explain transformations in architectural style and, correspondingly, that architecture could be read as evidence of racial history. Lastly, most believed that the variety of architectural forms, and the peoples that produced them, could be hierarchically arrayed along a temporalized scale of progress from the primitive to the modern; the latter was often associated with Germanic (Aryan) peoples who were seen as pioneering the ushering of industrial materials and methods into architecture. Below, I elaborate on how each of these racial ideas manifested itself in late nineteenth-century architectural theory, and how they eventually became subtexts of an emerging modernist architectural consciousness.

The Rise of Race Thinking in the Nineteenth Century

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed an acute intensification of racialism in Europe.4 To be sure, eighteenth-century white Europeans held ethnocentric and aesthetic prejudices about the new peoples encountered through colonial conquest and exploration. And it’s often said that the modern concept of race was invented during the Enlightenment by natural philosophers such as Carl Linnaeus, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, who drew on the period’s obsession with classification to produce some of the earliest racial taxonomies. Nevertheless, most thinkers before the nineteenth century hewed to the Christian belief in the essential unity of humankind. Blumenbach, who wrote one of the first modern treatises on race, articulated a relativist view that the “innumerable varieties of mankind run into one other by insensible degrees” (Blumenbach, 2000:27). The dominant eighteenth-century explanations for racial difference pointed to climate and environment, leaving room for the possibility of adaptation and progress. For instance, Buffon famously thought that Africans who moved to cold climates would whiten in complexion over several generations (Jordan, 1968:243). Civilizational hubris was thus tempered by a fundamental belief in human equality and biological uniformity, as well as a tentativeness about the causes of human diversity.

By the early nineteenth century, such attitudes increasingly gave way to a pervasive belief in starkly distinct and deeply engrained racial natures that either caused or retarded cultural development, accompanied by a marked increase in Europeans’ sense of their own civilizational superiority (Stepan, 1982:4; Pitts, 2006). Historians have cited numerous reasons for the rise of virulent race thinking during this period. Chief among these were slavery and imperialism: it is no accident that the slaveholding United States and the leading imperial powers France and England harbored the strongest proponents of racial theory and ‘science.’5 Beliefs about the inherent superiority of European civilization helped justify imperial subjugation and racial slavery – economic systems that surged to meet large-scale industrialization’s need for raw materials and expanded markets. As Hannah Arendt observed, political and economic imperatives drove race science and belief rather than the other way around (Arendt, 1973).

Nineteenth-century racial thinkers aspired to ‘scientificity.’ This meant they continued the eighteenth-century obsession with classification, but now focused increasingly on precise measurement, especially of crania, to prove the permanence of racial attributes. Older ideas of cultural and population groups being distributed across geographic space gave way to chronological schema that arrayed different races along a hierarchical and developmental timescale, from the primitive to the most advanced. As the classificatory table was replaced by the historical timeline, European race theorists initiated what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian has called the “denial of coevalness” of the other, consigning nonwhites to a time and a stage of development before and below contemporary Europeans. The period also saw a growing fascination with narratives of racial evolution, decline, diffusion, and hybridization as underlying causes of historical change.

All of these tropes of racial theory were mirrored in architectural thought. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, architects hotly debated whether they should continue imitating the immutable model of divine nature (the classical position) or, following the model of the biological and geological sciences, try to uncover the objective laws of historical change governing how societies and their cultural products evolve over time. Proponents of the latter position saw their viewpoint as not only

[...] the specific role of racialism – the idea that humankind can be divided into indelible and unequally endowed biological groupings – in the entanglements of modernity, history, empire, and architecture has not been sufficiently recognized.
01. Comparación entre ornamentos ‘árabes’ (izquierda) y ‘moriscos’ (centro y derecha). / Comparison between ‘Arabian’ and ‘Moresque’ ornaments. 


more modern and up to date, but also as potentially authorizing the use of various nonclassical styles, from the Gothic to the eclectic to a yet-to-be-discovered modern idiom that would take advantage of new materials like iron and glass. For supporters of classicism, any architecture outside the antique tradition was basically irrelevant. Thus, ironically it was often the more ‘progressive’ advocates of architectural change fighting entrenched academic classicists who turned to anthropology and race science to bolster their ideas about modernity, history, and cultural production. Within this cultural and intellectual context, racial thinking manifested itself in architectural thought in at least three main ways: in the growth of typological theories tying each nation to a race with its own distinct architecture – now with an emphasis on the mental attributes of a population in contrast to the earlier attributions to climate or environment; in narratives of architectural history premised on evolution, diffusion, and hybridization of populations; and in the arrangement of architectural forms into linear and developmental scales, from primitive to modern. Over time, racial themes evolved from a nationalist emphasis on finding the appropriate architecture for a particular country to finding the best expression for the present – that is, for the modern period.

Racial Typologies of Architecture

Paradoxically, it was the arch-classicist and French academician Antoine- Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy who opened the door to an expanded typology of architecture informed by ethnography. Sylvia Lavin has called him “the first architectural theorist to make a radical break with the tradition of monogenesia” — that is, to suggest multiple origins for architecture besides the classical temple-cum-hut famously idealized by Marc-Antoine Laugier (Lavin, 1992:63). Influenced by the ethnographic theories of Cornelius de Pauw and Lord Kames, Quatremère de Quincy in 1788 wrote an essay positing not one but three original types of architecture: wooden construction; and the hut, invented by a farming people, which would form the basis of Greek architecture (Quatremère de Quincy, 1788). Whereas the cave led to a monotonous architecture with no outlet for further improvement, the tent was too impermanent and light for meaningful evolution. Only the happy medium of the hut, with its combination of lightness and strength, was susceptible to progressive development. Quatremère de Quincy’s theory was still more mythological than empirical, but nevertheless offered a harbinger of subsequent more anthropologically derived, materialist approaches to explaining global architectural diversity. It also foreshadowed a trope of Europeans being considered the people capable of progress and historical advancement, while other groups were condemned to historical stagnation.

We can witness how architectural history became more explicitly racialized over the course of the nineteenth century by comparing Quatremère de Quincy’s typology to that proposed by Edward Freeman in A History of Architecture (1849). Freeman repeated the schema of the Chinese tent, Egyptian cave, and Greek hut as original types, but added a fourth – the Gothic cathedral whose structure mimicked the “deep forests of the North” (Freeman, 1849:35). Whereas Quatremère de Quincy had cited geography and habit as the conditioning forces for these primitive typologies, Freeman posited a deeper force: “An unfathomable Law of Divine Providence has divided the offspring of our common parents into widely distinguished races: there are certain definite marks stamped deep upon the physical and moral constitution of each, upon their habits, their tone of thought, and above all, their language” (Freeman, 1849:12). This deeper force was race – which Freeman understood in idealist terms as a kind of national genius, traceable to an ancient bloodline. For Freeman, the Gothic, with its soaring vaults and “barbaric grandeur,” embodied the purest expression of the “stern and hardy virtues” of the Northman (Freeman, 1849:150:212:298-99).

In Freeman, we can see one of the guiding axioms for nineteenth-century architects seeking to make sense of the diversity of global architectural forms: the principle that architectural monuments reflected the culture and people who created them at a specific time period – that buildings were the “veritable writing of peoples,” as the French critic Hippolyte Fortouli put it in 1841 (Bressani, 2014:119). This idea was already incipient in Johann Winkelmann’s attribution of the greatness of Greek art to the felicities of Greek climate and culture. And it was given additional support by the ethos of national romanticism, inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion that each ethnic group possesses a unique Volkgeist. Yet the idea of different population groups producing distinct characteristic architecture acquired a more explicit racialized valence in the nineteenth century, as architects absorbed the tenets of racial science to promote the idea that intrinsic mental characteristics of various peoples could be manifested in constructional systems and ornamental forms. Eric Michaud has given the name “racial attributionism” to the idea, which became dominant in art history, that “individual objects were determined by ‘styles,’ styles were determined by peoples or nations, and nations by their racial components” (Michaud, 2012). Examples of casual racial attributionism were common in mid-century architectural writing. We see it in Owen Jones’s Grammar of Ornament, a tremendously influential compendium of global ornament generally regarded as promoting a liberal cosmopolitan appreciation of non-Western design. In the book, Jones repeatedly associated formal properties of ornamentation such as proportion and geometry to racial-national mental attributes. For instance, Jones was particularly dismissive of Turkish ornament, which he described as having coarser curves than Persian or Moorish, because it was curved rather than incised. Although he acknowledged the differences were “almost impossible […] to explain by words,” he nevertheless held that the eye could easily distinguish between the “works of the refined and spiritual Persian, the not less refined but reflective Arabian, or the unimaginative Turk” (Jones, 1868:36).[Fig. 01] Stereotypical mental attributes were thus imagined to be legible in aesthetic forms – in proportion, the curve of a line, the choice of color. Perhaps the most systematic racial typology of architecture of the period can be found in the writing of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, who was deeply influenced by race theorists of the day, especially Joseph Arthur, comte de Gobineau, author of Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1853-1855) – a text promoting the superiority of the white race that would have a notorious afterlife in twentieth-century Germany.11 Racial ideas pervaded Viollet-le-Duc’s writing after 1860, appearing in the Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française (1854-1868) and Entretiens sur l’architecture (1865-1872), and constituting the central organizing trope of Histoire de l’habitation humaine (original French 1875; English translation 1876). The latter, a quasi-allegorical history of dwellings from primordial times to the present, was intended for a juvenile audience – a fact that is more damning than exculpatory; it also did not prevent the work from being read seriously, especially by architects in the United States. Viollet-le-Duc organized the book into chapters, each linking a racial group to a distinct typology of dwelling. He began several chapters with descriptions of the physical and mental attributes of the race, focusing on the traits codified by nineteenth-century race theorists – hair and skin color, the shape of the eyes, the slope and height of the forehead – supplemented with caricatured physiognomic illustrations.[Fig. 02] A Central Asian nomad was described as having “copper-coloured oily skin,” “a projecting and wide fore- head,” “loop-like eyes with black pupils,” and a “thick
short nose,” all of which give him a “repulsive aspect” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875:59). Viollet-le-Duc’s characterizations followed the racial stereotypes of the day: Blacks were an “abject race,” the Semites were simple, contemplative, and calculating; and the “Arya” were “of great stature and brave […] like superior beings, born to command” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875:45;122-23). Following the scheme laid out by Quatremère de Quincy, Viollet-le-Duc associated each racial group with a distinct dwelling type, material, and constructional method – the Chinese with trellis-like houses relying on a principle of ‘agglutination’ of wood members, the Turanian race with small stones and mortar, and the Arya with wooden frame construction. The timber house was described as a kind of racial signature, visible even when the Aryans mixed with other races. Or as he put it in another text: “Frame construction characterizes the Aryas, and everywhere one finds it, we are sure to see an immigration, or at least an Aryan influence” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1877). Viollet-le-Duc extended this argument in L’art russe (1877), where he proposed that modern Russian architects look to their Slavic roots for inspiration (Viollet-le-Duc, 1877). But the architecture that he championed most fervently throughout his career was the French Gothic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which he adored for its supposed structural rationalism and its manifestation of a spirit of progress. He called the Gothic the “style arising out of our own genius,” as opposed to the borrowed idiom of classicism or the incongruous mixtures of eclecticism (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875;246). We have already seen with Freeman how racial theory could underpin romantic Gothic revivalism, a view shared by others, including Daniel Rameé in France and George Gilbert Scott in England. Scott called the Gothic the “native architecture of our own race and country,” one found in nations “wholly or partially of Germanic origin, in whose hands the civilization of the modern world has been vested” (Scott, 1879:14;17). What is important to note about Viollet-le-Duc, however, is the particular way he makes this connection between the Gothic and race, via the notion of a special aptitude for rationality. Viollet-le-Duc theorized that the Gothic had emerged from a free class of lay artisans and builders working in newly free French communes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The racial origins of this class lay in the Gallo-Roman peoples who possessed a “natural genius” defined by “supple and innovative natures,” and who were “quick to seize upon the practical side of things. They were active and energetic, given to reasoning things out; and they were driven by good sense as much as they were by imagination.” These people “never stopped trying to improve” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1900:71). This idea that a white race – whether it was Viollet-le-Duc’s “Gallo-Roman” or “Aryan” or the “Anglo-Saxon” in England and America – had a special proclivity for independence, rationality, practicality, and innovation, which was reflected in its architecture, would be critical in modern ism’s ability to adopt racialized ideas while shedding explicit racism in the early twentieth century.

Racial Diffusion and Hybridization

A corollary to the idea of racial attributionism was the theory that stylistic changes reflected the main motive force of historical change itself, which was understood to be the movements and interactions of different racial groups. The prevailing view among racial theorists of both the monogenist and polygenist schools – opposing groups of thought that cited the origins of humankind from either one or multiple origins – was that the major racial stocks had been established long ago. Since then, the races had spread across the globe, either conquering or crossing with other races (Stepan, 1982:93). In the nineteeth century, a number of romantic historians, beginning in France but rapidly spreading throughout Europe, popularized the idea of history as a chronicle of racial
The French historians François Guizot and Augustin Thierry (1795–1865), for example, interpreted contemporary French social and political structures as resulting from ancient interactions between races of Gauls, Romans, and Franks. Such narratives were mapped onto the class conflicts of contemporary France: it was often claimed that the French nobility were derived from the Frankish invaders, whereas the commoners and bourgeoisie had descended from a Gallic population. Romantics pointed to the fifth century “barbarian invasions” to construct a narrative of a northern people who regenerated a feminine, decadent Roman Europe, propelling it into modernity (Michaud, 2012:60). Gobineau would extend this racial migration, while widespread and occasionally beneficial – including for the development of Indian architecture through this lens, describing it as having declined from a purer, earlier Aryan-Buddhist phase to a later period characterized by a mixture of Hindu and “Muhamaddan” styles (Guha-Thakurta, 2004:16-17).

For Viollet-le-Duc also, architecture history was the product of racial migrations and interracial struggles. Here again we see the influence of Gobineau, although the architect had a much more positive outlook than the degeneration-obsessed racial theorist (Bressani, 2014:345-65). Viollet-le-Duc echoed Gobineau’s and Fergusson’s understanding that under the right circumstances, racial mixture could be the source of artistic achievement, writing in the Dictionnaire: “Any artistic explosion [...] in history is produced through the contact of two different races, [...] [the] intellectual fermentation of natures endowed with different aptitudes” (quoted in Bressani 2014:354). He repeated the idea that Athenian architecture was attributable to a racial mixture of Aryans and Semites. Elsewhere, he posited that the monuments of Uxmal, Tulum, and Chichén Itzá were created by a white race – or possibly a mixture of white and yellow – migrating across the Bering Strait; he was convinced that the present inhabitants of South America could not be responsible for such monumental constructions (Baridon, 1996:52). Even more insistently than in Fergusson, the protagonists of Viollet-le-Duc’s racialized architectural history were the Arya, whom he described in Histoire de l’habitation as a self-sufficient nomadic tribe pushed out of their homeland in the Himalayas. As they migrate west, the Arya subjugate, enslave, and intermix with local populations, spawning new racial subgroups – including the Dorians (Aryan-Hellenes), the Franks (Aryan-Germans), and the Gauls (Aryan-Celts). As one character in the book voices: “The man of noble race [the Aryas] is born to fight to establish his power over the accursed races, and to be the master of the earth” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875:121-182).

Viollet-le-Duc’s racialized approach to architectural history met with contemporary objections, but nevertheless influenced and resonated with other architects of his time. In their L’Habitation humaine exhibit at the 1889 Paris World Exposition, Charles Garnier and Auguste Ammann would pick up on the idea of Aryan migration as the motive force in the diffusion and development of modern European culture, even including a map depicting Aryan movements in the exhibition catalog [Fig. 04].

The idea that history was shaped by racial conflicts, migrations, and admixtures influenced art and architectural historians in the nineteenth century. Michaud has argued that in the early decades of the century, the racial opposition between Germanic and Latinate cultures became one of the principle interpretive tropes structuring historical and art historical writing in Europe (Michaud, 2012:60). As we have already glimpsed with Freeman and Viollet-le-Duc, racial history was sometimes cited to support romantic nationalist critiques of classicism and eclecticism. But the thesis of racial migration as cause of stylistic development was not limited to proponents of the Gothic. The Englishman James Fergusson, an advocate of the neo-Renaissance, relied on it in penning numerous histories that were some of the first “global” histories of architecture. Fergusson explicitly aimed to write architectural history as ethnography, and deployed race as a central structuring principle. As he explained in the first volume of his History of Architecture in All Countries (1865), the characters of the races were constant and unchanging, and the migrations, conquests, and mixture among these racial groups gave rise to different architectural styles. “Progress among men, as among the animals, seems to be achieved not so much by advances made within the limits of the group, as by the supercession of the less finely organized beings by those of a higher class,” he wrote (Fergusson, 1865:73).

Thus, Fergusson explained that it was the migration of one branch of Aryans southward and their intermixture with a Turanian (yellow) race that had produced the “brilliant” but “evanescent” civilization of classical Greece. The combination of the artistic feeling of the Turanian with the common sense of the Aryan is what enabled creations such as the Parthenon. Yet he also linked miscegenation to inevitable aesthetic degeneration, claiming that when two dissimilar races mixed, they tended to produce a more brilliant but short-lived “stock” (Fergusson, 1865:212). Fergusson interpreted Indian architecture through this lens, describing it as having declined from a purer, earlier Aryan-Buddhist phase to a later period characterized by a mixture of Hindu and “Muhamaddan” styles (Guha-Thakurta, 2004:16-17).

For Viollet-le-Duc also, architecture history was the product of racial migrations and interracial struggles. Here again we see the influence of Gobineau, although the architect had a much more positive outlook than the degeneration-obsessed racial theorist (Bressani, 2014:345-65). Viollet-le-Duc echoed Gobineau’s and Fergusson’s understanding that under the right circumstances, racial mixture could be the source of artistic achievement, writing in the Dictionnaire: “Any artistic explosion [...] in history is produced through the contact of two different races, [...] [the] intellectual fermentation of natures endowed with different aptitudes” (quoted in Bressani 2014:354). He repeated the idea that Athenian architecture was attributable to a racial mixture of Aryans and Semites. Elsewhere, he posited that the monuments of Uxmal, Tulum, and Chichén Itzá were created by a white race – or possibly a mixture of white and yellow – migrating across the Bering Strait; he was convinced that the present inhabitants of South America could not be responsible for such monumental constructions (Baridon, 1996:52). Even more insistently than in Fergusson, the protagonists of Viollet-le-Duc’s racialized architectural history were the Arya, whom he described in Histoire de l’habitation as a self-sufficient nomadic tribe pushed out of their homeland in the Himalayas. As they migrate west, the Arya subjugate, enslave, and intermix with local populations, spawning new racial subgroups – including the Dorians (Aryan-Hellenes), the Franks (Aryan-Germans), and the Gauls (Aryan-Celts). As one character in the book voices: “The man of noble race [the Aryas] is born to fight to establish his power over the accursed races, and to be the master of the earth” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875:121-182).

Viollet-le-Duc’s racialized approach to architectural history met with contemporary objections, but nevertheless influenced and resonated with other architects of his time. In their L’Habitation humaine exhibit at the 1889 Paris World Exposition, Charles Garnier and Auguste Ammann would pick up on the idea of Aryan migration as the motive force in the diffusion and development of modern European culture, even including a map depicting Aryan movements in the exhibition catalog [Fig. 04].

Racial Timelines
A great many of these racialized architectural histories depicted white Aryans as agents of historical change whose architecture was uniquely capable of progress and development. Other, weaker groups were implicitly or explicitly portrayed as prone to stagnation or conquest. This differential racial capacity for progress reflected the theories of anthropologists, who in the nineteenth century began transposing the spatial dispersal of human groups into a temporal schema. Races were no longer understood simply as diverse populations inhabiting various areas of the globe, but as occupying different positions in the timeline of history, in a kind of temporalized reprise of the Great Chain of Being. Such theories offered various schema for dividing history into stages. Europeans labeled certain groups as ‘passive,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive,’ and ‘childlike’ – generally Native Americans, sub-Saharan Africans, and inhabitants of the recently discovered South Sea Islands – placing these at one end of the timescale; Europeans invariably positioned themselves at the opposite end. The consensus among many anthropologists, race scientists, and historians was that European societies had evolved through historical time, whereas non-Western cultures remained “arrested” at their moment of inception, suspended in a nonhistorical mode. The introduction of evolutionary theory added another valence to this hierarchical timescale: now the “lower races” were ones that had evolved least, represented atavisms, or were bio-logically weaker and thus disposed to being dominated. Technology and empire enabled Europeans to imagine themselves as predestined by biological aptitude to advance, conveniently ignoring that their economic and technological development was enabled by raw materials, labor, and markets appropriated through imperial conquest, while disrupting colonized countries’ own trajectories (Pitts, 2006:17-18).

This hierarchical, racialized temporal scale was reflected in numerous architectural
histories of the period. While chronological arrangements were not new, almost all narratives before the nineteenth century were limited to European and Near Eastern examples and reissued the supposed lineage of Egypt to Greece to Rome to western Europe. Growing awareness of the wide range of cultural production from around the world presented European architects with a conundrum over how to transpose geographical space into the linear, chronological arrangements. The arbitrariness behind white Europeans’ placement of other cultures in a linear timescale can be seen, for instance, in Fergusson’s changing position on where to place the architecture of Asia and America within his chronology. In his Illustrated Handbook of Architecture (1855), they were cordoned off in a separate section in the beginning of the book. A decade later, in History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day (1865), he inserted these continents’ production between the volumes on the Medieval/Byzantine and Modern periods (i.e., European architecture from the Renaissance forward) (Fergusson, 1865:76-77). The author brushed aside objections to his imprecise chronology, reasoning that these traditions were of “far less consequence” than the European, and anyway, being based on instinct rather than intellect, they were incapable of progress (Fergusson, 1865:76-76).

Another prime example of the civilizational developmental timeline manifested in architecture can be found in Garnier and Ammann’s aforementioned exhibit of human habitation at the 1889 Paris Exposition. At the exhibit, reconstructed examples of houses from around the world were arrayed in a linear arrangement, from “primitive” to advanced, all under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower [Fig. 05]. The message was clear: some cultures were assigned to prehistory, or no history at all, whereas others were hurtling into an engineered future of iron and glass. This microcosmic timeline was mirrored in the exhibition as a whole, where a hierarchy was established between the Western countries on the Champ de Mars and non-Western architectures on the Esplanade des Invalides (itself bifurcated into a few societies represented in monumental architectures and others relegated to ethnographic villages). In the accompanying book L’Habitation Humaine (1892), Garnier and Ammann placed Chinese, Japanese, Eskimo, Aztec, Incan, African, and Australian dwellings in a section entitled “Peoples Isolated from the General Movement of Humanity” – this followed a section devoted to civilizations shaped by “Invasions of the Aryans” encompassing Europe, Iran, and India. One ostensible complication in these linear timescales that must be mentioned is the phenomena of modernist primitivism, which impacted architecture as well as the visual arts. Owen Jones is exemplary of primitivist ideology, which sees African or Oceanic cultural products as key to the “regeneration of a tired, degenerate, vulgarized, mechanical European civilization,” as Robert J. C. Young (1995;52) puts it. In Grammar of Ornament Jones critiqued what he saw as the degraded industrially produced ornament of the day, counseling his fellow Europeans to learn from the aesthetic output of more “primitive” cultures: “If we would return to a more healthy condition, we must even be as little children or as savages: we must get rid of the acquired and artificial, and return to and develope [sic] natural instincts.” Jones thus distinguished between the artificial culture of the modern West and the “savage,” “natural,” “childlike,” “instinctual” culture of the non-West. It is important to recognize how primitivism, although ostensibly valuing non-Western cultures, relies precisely on the idea of the linear developmental scale – that some cultures are closer to nature while others are more historically developed. Although Jones argued for the universality of the instinct to ornament, his words repeatedly affirmed the idea of a scale of progress: “As we advance higher, [we go] from the decoration of the rude tent or wigwam to the sublime works of a Phidias and Praxiteles” (Jones, 1868:2). Jones’s book followed an ostensibly crystal-clear chronological schema – beginning with examples of the “Ornament of Savage Tribes” (which he connected to tattooing practices) and ending with examples of European (Elizabethan and Italian) ornament, before finally closing with several plates of leaves illustrated “from nature” intended to serve as models for contemporary English design [Fig. 06]. This kind of racial timeline of architecture would be given iconic form in Banister Fletcher’s Tree of Architecture diagram, which depicted the development of architecture as stemming from multiple ancient origins: While the branches depicting non-Western architecture are short and end close to the trunk, constituting so many “dead ends,” a stout central trunk rises in the center tracing the progress from Greek to Roman to various early modern European national architectures, up to the modern revival styles at the peak.

**Toward a Deracinated Modern Architecture**

Racial theories of architecture did not simply disappear in the twentieth century, but underwent a process of sublation. David Theo Goldberg has described a shift between two kinds of racialism occurring in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, from an older ideology of racial naturalism which positioned non-Europeans as inherently inferior, to a racial historicism that deemed these same groups as immature and less developed. Racial historicism, Goldberg writes, underpinned movements like abolition, assimilationist colonial regimes, as well as more recently the ideas of color blind “racelessness” as the political teleology of modernization (Goldberg, 2001). This shift from racial naturalism to racial historicism is reflected in the way that the narrative of a racial developmental timeline began to predominate over the older ideas of racial typology and diffusionism in architectural discourse. As nationalism gave way to a cosmopolitanism among elite European cultural practitioners, the question “In what style shall we Germans / French / English / Americans (or Anglo-Saxons / Aryans / Gallo-Romans) build?” increasingly gave way to the problem: “What is modern architecture?” The notion of a temporal progression from primitive to modern was retained, but the attendant concept of inherent racial fixity was sublimated. In the process, race became first subtext and then a specter of modernism.

This process of the sublation of race can be witnessed in the writing of Adolf Loos, an architect who bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in more ways than one. Often lost in the contemporary understanding of Loos as prophet of unornamented modernism is the way his definition of the modern is deeply steeped in the racial logics of the previous century. Indeed, in his famous essay “Ornament and Crime” (1913), Loos borrowed Owen Jones’s association of ornament with “primitive” peoples but went even further in arguing that the use of ornament should not just be reformed but abolished. In labeling ornament a “crime,” Loos declared it an aesthetic practice suited only for “Papuans,” criminals, and other inhabitants of the lower rungs of
of a particular race was now tied to the transcendence of national and racial divisions. Yet like the ideology of color blindness that it mirrored, modernism continues to be haunted by its racist genealogy, which has yet to be fully hummed.

NOTES

1. A few important exceptions should be noted, including Crinson (1996), and Davis (2009). On “racialism” versus raison, see Appiah (1999:3).

2. On nineteenth-century historicism, see Colquhoun (1997); Bergdoll (1994); and Hovland (2004).

3. By “race science” I mean not just studies exclusively focused on race, but also work in the fields of philology, ethnography, biology, and physical anthropology that took race as a central organizing paradigm.

4. For a general overview on the history of race, see Fredrickson (2002).

5. In contrast, in Germany (which arrived late to the imperial contest) anthropological science was more liberal and tended to focus on material archaeology and culture rather than racial classification, at least in the period before the twentieth century. (Glenn Penny, 2008). This emphasis on material archaeology is reflected in the work of German architects who most closely engaged with anthropology, such as Gottfried Semper. On Semper’s relation to nineteenth-century ethnography, see Malgrage (1985), and Davis (2009).


7. Freeman probably adopted this typology from Quatremaire de Quincy through reading Hope (1855). However, Hope emphasized the transmission of these inherited types by “habit” rather than instinct.

8. Freeman believed the Gothic embodied the genius of the Teutonic Northman, he did allow that the style had multiple origins: He believed, for instance, that the pointed arch was probably adopted by the “Teutonic races” from Arabic sources— but whereas in the hands of the Arabs, the pointed arch remained in a “dead unproductive state,” the Northmen enabled it to attain perfection of expression by endowing it with “true life and vigour” (311, 27).


10. I mean liberal in the broad sense of embracing reform and progress, though one could also speculate on the relationship between Jones’s aesthetic reformism and the political liberalism being articulated simultaneously by John Stuart Mill and others. On liberal philosophy and race, see: Mehta (1999) and Pitts (2010).

11. On Viollet-le-Duc’s engagement with race science and anthropology, see: Bressani (2014); Baridon (1996); Davis (2009); and Davis (2019).

12. The term “racial signature” is from O’Connell (1993:442).


14. On the rise of various Nordic myths in the nineteenth century and earlier, see: Baran (1965); Polaková (1996); and Horneman (1986).

15. For a summary, see: Baran (1965).


17. “[T]he Aryan-Hellenes, Semitized in Greece, found themselves in conditions of such intermingling as to have produced arts superior to what the world had seen or will ever see again.” Viollet-le-Duc, eighth Entretien, quoted in Bressani (2014:350).

18. Bressani cites precedents for these ideas not only in Gobineau but also Michelet, Renan, and Ramette (Bressani, 2009:355).

19. Regarding the reception of Viollet-le-Duc’s L’tratasse, where he ana- lyzed the racial composition of the Russian population in order to argue
20. Johannes Fabian has argued that nineteenth-century anthropologists transformed the spatial dispersion of human groups onto a temporal model adapted from the natural scientists. Past and living cultures “were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream.” Fabian locates this temporalization at the origin of anthropologists’ ideas about civilization, evolution, development, modernization, and acculturation. (Fabian, 1983:17).


23. Thus a simplification. In Europe, modernism was variously associated with German culture, with cosmopolitan rootlessness, and with Jewish and Mediterranean–North African cultures. See: Overy (2005).

BIBLIOGRAFIA | BIBLIOGRAPHY


LOOS, Adolf. Das Andere: A Journal for the Introduction of Western Culture into Austria, 1905.


VIOLETTE-LE-DUC, Eugène-Emmanuel. Cours d’esthétique appliquée à l’histoire de l’art, 1864.


Irène Cheng
<ircheng@cca.edu>

Associate Professor of Architecture at the California College of the Arts, where she directs the Experimental History Project. She is the coeditor, with Bernard Tschumi, of The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century (Monacelli Press, 2003), and with Charles Davis and Mabel Wilson of Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020). Her forthcoming book The Shape of Utopia (University of Minnesota Press) explores the relationship between architecture and politics in nineteenth-century American utopias.